



Wine with Rosie Bainbridge

The Pacific North-West

I recently attended a tasting of wines from Oregon and Washington in the Pacific north-west, hailed as some of America's greatest. To most consumers American wine means Californian – inevitably, given its high output – but other centres such as Oregon (with Pinot-Noir) and Washington (with Syrah) are beginning to establish world class reputations. The wines were varied; some were fantastic and showed the true potential of these fledgling wine states. As they are so different, I've decided to feature Oregon this month and Washington next.

Oregon was the destination of early settlers from the east: 'First came a trickle, then the trickle became a flow as hundreds of men, women and children moved across the plains to the Promised Land at the end of the longest wagon road in history ...' wrote Thomas K. Worcester in *A Portrait of Oregon*.

When the pioneers of the 19th century rolled west in their covered wagons to Oregon they found a land blessed with great natural beauty: the Cascades, mountain streams, the mighty River Columbia, a rugged Pacific coastline, ancient forests of redwoods, spruce and white cedar, and fertile valleys that became the breadbasket of Oregon. The wines of Oregon date back to this time, with plantings recorded in Willamette in the 1880s. Riesling was one of the first successes, but today Pinot Noir reigns supreme, followed by Pinot-Gris (grigio), Chardonnay and Riesling.

Willamette valley is the centre of winemaking, with two-thirds of the state's 360 plus vineyards and wineries. This hundred mile long valley, just south of Portland between the coast and Cascades, has one of the best climates for Pinots – summer days are dry and hot, nights are cold and clear. In most years



this perfect combination enables Pinot Noir grapes to ripen very slowly and develop their fullest flavour, although Pacific influences can mean there is a danger of damp autumns and damaging rains. In some years this can make for a tricky harvest – especially in the case of delicate, fickle Pinot Noir. One can fall in and out of love with Pinots as vintages are so variable.

The modern wine industry didn't exist

before the 1960s but Oregon now has 13,500 acres under vine. However its image is still one of rustic charm, simple 'homoness' without the glitz of California. Oregon attracts a different type of winemaker with an emphasis on 'green-wine' production. Most of the wines are organic, some are biodynamic. These are small scale hand-crafted wines.



David Lett, who led the way when he left California for Oregon in 1966 intent on making fine Pinot Noir, established Eyrie Vineyard in the undulating Dundee hills at the northern end of the valley. Oregon Pinot Noir ripens about six weeks later than in California which, says Lett, is 'essential in achieving the finest wines possible from this variety.' In 1979 Eyrie Vineyard's Pinot Noir hit the headlines when it was voted one of the best at the Gault-Millau Paris competition. A year later it was a close second to Robert Drouhin's distinguished 1959 Chambolle-Musigny. Lett, known locally as 'Papa Pinot', and Oregon had earned significant critical acclaim. Monsieur Drouhin paid them a surprising compliment by purchasing land in the Dundee hills, and establishing a state-of-the art winery, 'Domaine Drouhin Oregon', which is managed by his accomplished winemaker daughter, Veronique. At the London tasting this burgeoning wine region was represented by over 150 wines. In 2000 it had 135 vineyards, by 2007 there were over 350. I tried as many Pinots as possible and gave high points to: Elk Cove, Sokol Blosser, Firesteed and of course Domaine Drouhin, but was whisked off at 12 noon to the Washington State seminar and had to miss a few ...

The good news is I discovered that every July an Oregon Pinot Noir wine festival is held in McMinnville. An international celebration held over three days, set in landscaped gardens with seminars, special lunches, dinners, and two walk-around tastings. A visit might just be in order, then I can catch up with Barkin' Frog, Whistling Dog and Hip Chicks do Wine.

Oregon is still one of the world's most breathtakingly beautiful places with vast empty spaces where ranchers move cattle, and covered wagons still roll across the open range. Now it is certainly the 'promised land' for Pinot Noir in America.

Despite their acclaim these wines are not easy to find on the high street and the best bet is with The Wine Society, or via the website: www.everywine.co.uk

For further details of the 'Oregon Pinot-Noir Wine Festival Tour'. Contact: rosie@wineworld.plus.com Tel: 07891 823560.